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Religion, reason and nondirective teaching: a reply to Trevor Cooling

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In a recent article in this journal (Cooling, 2012), Trevor Cooling offers a detailed critique of some work of mine on what we agree to be an important and neglected educational question: what should schools teach *directively* and what *nondirectively*? To teach a problem or question *directively* is to teach it with the intention of guiding pupils towards an approved solution or correct answer; to teach it *nondirectively* is to withhold such guidance and to present different possible solutions or answers as impartially as possible. It is now widely accepted that schools should tackle social, moral and religious issues on which it would be inappropriate for them to endorse particular views, and professional literature on *how* to teach *nondirectively* has proliferated over the last decade or so; but remarkably little guidance has been forthcoming on exactly *what* should be taught in this way.

The answer I have proposed to this question, following Robert Dearden, is that a matter should be taught *nondirectively* when contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason (Hand, 2008, 2007; Dearden, 1981). This is an *epistemic* criterion because the judgment about how to present possible views rests solely on the evidence and argument in their support. Its most prominent rival is the *behavioural* criterion, which states that matters should be taught *nondirectively* when numbers of people are observed to disagree about them. Here the judgment about how to present possible views rests not on their epistemic credentials, but on whether or not there are people who sincerely hold them. I argue that, because the central aim of education is to equip pupils with a capacity for and inclination to rational thought and action, teachers have an obligation to endorse views for which the relevant evidence and argument is decisive, regardless of whether there are people who sincerely hold contrary views.

As a test case, I apply the epistemic criterion to teaching about the morality of homosexual acts (Hand, 2007). Advocates of the behavioural criterion must prescribe *nondirective* teaching of this topic: there is no doubt that homosexual acts are sincerely held by some people to be morally legitimate and by others to be morally wrong. I contend, however, that advocates of the epistemic criterion should prescribe *directive* teaching of the topic, because the relevant epistemic considerations weigh decisively in favour of the moral legitimacy of homosexual acts.

Cooling advances two distinct objections to my position (though he does not clearly distinguish them). First, he argues that I dismiss too hastily a certain type of religious argument for the moral wrongness of homosexual acts, implying that he thinks the epistemic criterion may in fact require *nondirective* teaching in this area. Second, he suggests that there are, in any case, reasons to reject the epistemic criterion. Towards the end of his article he proposes an alternative criterion for deciding what should be taught *directively* and what *nondirectively*, which he calls the *diversity* criterion.

In this brief reply I respond to Cooling's two objections and explain why I think his proposed diversity criterion does not pass muster.

Arguments from scriptural authority

The group of arguments I am accused of dismissing too hastily are arguments from scriptural authority, which infer the wrongness of homosexual acts from their prohibition in sacred texts. To the charge of haste, I must plead guilty. In my attempt to rebut the various moral objections to homosexuality I devoted most of my attention to contemporary natural law arguments, which struck me as significantly more interesting than either perverted faculty or scriptural authority arguments. Consequently the latter received slightly short shrift, and perhaps shorter shrift than decorum requires.

The fact remains, though, that scriptural authority arguments are bad arguments. The prohibition of some act in a sacred text is never an adequate warrant for the belief that the act in question is morally wrong. There are familiar biblical texts declaring homosexuality to be an abomination: but such texts only license inferences about the moral status of homosexual acts if one has good reason to accept the major premise that all biblical injunctions are morally sound. And a passing acquaintance with the Bible is sufficient to show the absurdity of this premise.

Cooling does not offer a direct defence of arguments from scriptural authority. Rather he pursues two indirect defensive strategies. To classify arguments from scriptural authority as contrary to reason, he suggests, is, first, to align oneself with the untenable ‘secular view’ that ‘human intellectual progress has shown religious belief to be irrational’ (Cooling, 2012, p.174), and, second, to overlook the possibility of drawing on a ‘more sophisticated understanding of authority’ than scriptural literalism or inerrantism.

The first strategy amounts to little more than mudslinging. It is self-evidently not the case that holding one type of religious argument to be demonstrably unsound implies the view that religious belief is irrational. Although it seems to me clear that no religious proposition is known to be true, I think many religious claims are plausible and many religious arguments have rational force. As I have argued elsewhere, the principal justification for compulsory religious education in schools is that some religious claims *may in fact be true* and pupils therefore have a right to be made aware of them and provided with the wherewithal to evaluate them (Hand, 2004; Hand & White, 2004). Judging a particular kind of religious argument to be illegitimate hardly commits one to the same verdict on religious arguments in general.

Cooling’s second strategy is to take issue with the way I delimit the class of arguments from scriptural authority. I explain that I am specifically concerned with arguments that infer the moral wrongness of certain acts from their prohibition in a sacred text. Cooling points out that there are different ways of understanding the notion of scriptural authority, many of which do not depend on ‘finding injunctions in the text that are treated in literal fashion and are regarded as inerrant expressions of God’s will’ (Cooling, 2012, p.175). He seems ready to concede that ‘a literalist understanding buckles under rational scrutiny’, but urges us to recognise that there are ‘other more rationally credible understandings available’ (*ibid.*) Not only do I readily accept this point, but I make it myself in the article to which Cooling is responding:

Indeed, in the case of Christianity at least, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy appears to represent a serious theological confusion. The Christian God reveals

himself to the world not in the words of Scripture but in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible is venerated not because it is the mouthpiece of God, but because it records the prophecies and testimonies that preceded and followed the appearance of God in human history. (Hand, 2007, p.78)

I agree that there are sophisticated, non-literalist ways of understanding scriptural authority, ways that do not give rise to the misapprehension that moral truths can be directly inferred from scriptural prescriptions and prohibitions. But there are also literalist understandings of scriptural authority that *do* give rise to this misapprehension, and it is these understandings I take to be contrary to reason. Among the various arguments advanced in support of the claim that homosexual acts are morally wrong are those which purport to derive this conclusion from the prohibition of homosexual acts in a sacred text. It seems to me natural to refer to these as ‘arguments from scriptural authority’, but nothing of importance turns on how they are labelled. I am concerned only to show that arguments of this type are bad ones. Non-literalist conceptions of biblical authority that block the inferential step from scriptural prohibition to moral truth are untouched by my objection and irrelevant to my purpose.

Perhaps Cooling holds that there is a plausible theological argument for the moral wrongness of homosexual acts that differs from the three types of argument I consider and relies at some point on a sophisticated understanding of scriptural authority. If so, I should very much like to hear it. In the absence of such an argument, I remain persuaded that the relevant epistemic considerations weigh decisively in favour of the moral legitimacy of homosexual acts and, therefore, that the topic should be taught *directively* in schools.

The epistemic criterion

Cooling thinks not only that my verdict on the reasonableness of moral objections to homosexuality is wrong, but that, in any case, the reasonableness of contrary views is not all that matters when it comes to deciding whether an issue should be taught *nondirectively*. That is to say, he rejects the epistemic criterion itself. Unfortunately, his reasons for rejecting it are somewhat obscure. They appear to boil down to the thought that the epistemic criterion illegitimately privileges ‘rationality’ over ‘fairness’:

Current educational thinking on controversial issues is shaped by two fundamental principles. The first is the importance of rationality. Teachers and students are expected to give due regard to sound reasoning... The second is the importance of fairness. This captures concerns relating to community cohesion and state impartiality in matters of religion... The challenge is to achieve an appropriate balance between them. (Cooling, 2012, pp.169-70)

The problem with the epistemic criterion is that it fails to achieve the appropriate balance between these principles. It makes judgments about whether to teach something *directively* or *nondirectively* depend entirely on ‘sound reasoning’ and not at all on concern for ‘community cohesion and state impartiality’. In applications of the epistemic criterion we see ‘the disappearance of the fairness principle’, which ‘simply does not figure’ (p.173).

Neglect of the fairness principle matters, Cooling suggests, because some of the moral, religious and political issues schools are expected to tackle are controversial and divisive. In deciding how best to broach such issues teachers must be attentive not just to relevant

evidence and argument but to promoting peaceful co-existence and cultivating empathy and respect. Pupils must ‘be persuaded to take account of the needs of others with whom they share social space despite their differences because the alternative of attempted domination and resultant conflict always turns out worse for everyone’ (p.177).

Cooling thinks I am myself forced to acknowledge that the epistemic criterion ‘is inadequate as the sole criterion and needs supplementing’ (p.177) when I allow that contextual constraints ‘sometimes make it impossible, in practice, for schools to teach certain topics in accordance with the epistemic criterion’ (Hand, 2008, p.228). This allowance, he thinks, amounts to an admission that the rationality principle must be tempered by the fairness principle in judgments about what to teach nondirectively.

That schools have a responsibility to promote peaceful co-existence and cultivate empathy and respect is beyond serious dispute. And Cooling is clearly right that this responsibility bears directly on how teachers should approach controversial and divisive topics in the classroom. The crucial question is whether he is also right that it should influence their decisions about when to guide pupils towards particular views on such topics. I see no reason to think he is. The importance of learning to live together does not trump the demands of epistemic rationality: where a question is genuinely open, it would be wrong to teach it as closed even if doing so might reasonably be expected to reduce social discord; and where a matter is decisively settled by relevant evidence and argument, teaching it as if it were unsettled to spare the feelings of those in denial about its resolution would be quite unjustified.

While it is true that teachers of controversial issues ought to care about both rationality and civility, it is not true that every pedagogical judgment in this area is a matter of striking a balance between these two concerns. The decision to silence a pupil who makes an intentionally offensive joke is simply about civility; the decision to correct a pupil who makes a fallacious argument simply about rationality. Judgments about whether to teach something directly or nondirectively are, in the end, judgments about whether to try to influence what pupils believe; and the only considerations that properly bear on the formation and revision of beliefs are epistemic ones. The thought that some belief may be conducive to peaceful co-existence or community cohesion is not a serious reason for adopting it, so nor can it justify the attempt to impart it.

My allowance that contextual constraints sometimes prevent consistent application of the epistemic criterion is not fairly construed as an acknowledgment of the criterion’s inadequacy. In the passage Cooling cites, I consider the difficulty faced by schools serving creationist communities in teaching the theory of evolution. I observe that ‘where those communities are at liberty to make alternative arrangements for the education of their children, insisting on a directive pedagogical approach to the theory of evolution may be self-defeating’ (Hand, 2008, p.228). If teaching evolution directly is likely to result in large numbers of children being withdrawn from the school, it may be better to offer ‘a slightly compromised rationality-promoting education’ than to stand on epistemic principle. What I am allowing here is that there are imperatives other than educational ones with which schools have to contend: I am emphatically *not* allowing that there may be educational reasons for departing from the epistemic criterion.

The diversity criterion

What of Cooling's proposed alternative to the epistemic criterion? He formulates his diversity criterion as follows:

... the diversity criterion maintains that we should teach as controversial those matters where significant disagreement exists between different belief communities in society where those communities honour the importance of reason giving and exemplify a commitment to peaceful co-existence in society and teach as settled only those matters where there is demonstrable consensus in society which derives from wide agreement and compelling evidence.
(Cooling, 2012, p.177)

There is an immediate practical worry here about the difficulty of applying the diversity criterion. What is to count as a 'belief community'? How many believers are needed for a community and how many beliefs must they share? Presumably all religious and political groups qualify, including fundamentalist and extremist ones, along with groups sharing beliefs about, for example, government conspiracies, extraterrestrial life, spiritual mediumship and alternative medicine. What about identity groups whose members share beliefs about the common heritage or history of oppression that unites them? Or professional groups whose members are distinguished by their possession of specialised knowledge? Or guilds, or unions, or learned societies, or groups sharing an interest in choral music, astronomy, cricket, Middle-earth?

And once belief communities have been identified, how is it to be determined that they do or do not 'honour the importance of reason-giving'? It is hard to conceive of a community in which communication between members did not involve reason giving of one kind or another. Does Cooling have in mind a distinction between groups that merely engage in reason giving and groups that honour its importance? In which case how are the latter to be distinguished from the former? Without answers to these questions it will frequently be impossible to tell whether a matter is subject to disagreement between groups of the right kind to qualify for nondirective teaching.

Still, perhaps Cooling will be prepared to flesh out his account and specify exactly what he means by a belief community and by honoring the importance of reason-giving. His criterion would then be workable. Would it also be plausible?

The diversity criterion is a sophisticated version of the behavioural criterion. In its simplest form, the behavioural criterion requires that we teach nondirectively any matter on which at least some people disagree. An obvious problem with the criterion in this form is that, for more or less any given topic, there will be people somewhere who disagree about it, so nondirective teaching will be required across the board. Cooling attempts to solve this problem by building in some additional requirements. To qualify for nondirective teaching, a matter must be subject to disagreement not just between individuals but between communities; and the disagreeing communities must be committed to both reason-giving and peaceful co-existence. It is plausible to think that this more exacting version of the behavioural criterion is successful in reducing the number of topics that must be taught nondirectively.

But the problem Cooling has solved is by no means the most serious objection to the behavioural criterion. The reason the behavioural criterion is educationally unacceptable is that it routinely requires teachers to mislead pupils about the quality of evidence and argument bearing on a matter. In cases of ill-informed or unreasonable disagreement on questions to which the answers are known, teachers are obliged to present conclusive evidence and arguments as if they were inconclusive. Cooling's diversity criterion does little to address this objection. His stipulation that we need only worry about disagreements the parties to which honour the importance of reason giving is a gesture in the right direction, but is not nearly stringent enough to deal with the problem. There will still be many matters about which teachers deploying the diversity criterion will be required to mislead their pupils.

Let me offer just two examples. Consider, first, the belief that transfused blood is ingested or used as a nutrient by the recipient. This belief, in conjunction with the biblical prohibition on eating blood, is the basis on which Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions. The belief is rejected by the scientific community, which holds that transfused blood is used to expand volume and carry oxygen, not to provide nourishment. Both Jehovah's Witnesses and the scientific community would appear to be belief communities that honour the importance of reason giving and exemplify a commitment to peaceful co-existence. So, according to the diversity criterion, the question of whether transfused blood is ingested by the recipient must be taught nondirectively.

Or take, second, the law of infinitesimal dose, which states that the more a remedy is diluted, the greater its potency. This law underpins the preparation of homeopathic remedies, in which dilutions of 1:10⁶⁰ are standard. The homeopathic community holds the law to be valid; the scientific community holds it to be invalid. Again, since both communities are reason giving and peaceful, the diversity criterion seems to require nondirective teaching of this topic.

However, the belief about transfused blood and the law of infinitesimal dose are both demonstrably false. The relevant evidence and argument leave no room for reasonable disagreement about them. To present their truth value as unknown in the classroom is necessarily to give or imply highly misleading accounts of both the scientific reasoning that establishes their falsity and the unsound arguments advanced in their support.

The diversity criterion therefore falls at the same hurdle as other versions of the behavioural criterion: the mere fact that well-meaning people disagree about a claim, even large numbers of well-meaning people, is not a sufficient reason for teaching that claim nondirectively. Nondirective teaching is appropriate when, and only when, contrary views can be held on a matter without those views being contrary to reason. Cooling fails to show that there is an educationally acceptable alternative to the epistemic criterion.

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